



# General Research Orientations

## Chapter Summary

### Introduction

Chapter 1 opens with an example of a research interest into Aboriginal culture and walks through the process of determining what questions to ask in social research. This example is a practical application of the way in which a research project begins. It points to many reasons for conducting social research, such as assessing a particular social theory, gathering information to create social theory, understanding pressing social problems, or exploring personal experience.

### Theory and Research

The relationship between theory and research is complex, but it depends on two key factors: (1) the form of the theory, and (2) the relationship between the theory and the data.

A **theory** is a set of verifiable statements aiming to explain regularities in a particular area of social life. The theory usually consists of the following:

- *Definitions*: a statement of the key terms used in the theory.
- *Descriptions*: an overview of what exactly is being studied.
- *Relational statements*: the interconnection between the parts of the theory, its concepts, ideas, or measurable components (variables).

Theories may be stated in a deterministic way (if the social cohesion in a society decreases, the suicide rates will definitely go up), or a probabilistic way (if the social cohesion goes down, the suicide rates will probably go up).

Theories can also be described by different degrees of abstraction.

- **Grand theories** present very abstract perspectives on social life and establish a macro-view of social activity. The examples of grand theories would be a general theory of social action or an overarching theory of social power. These theories would attempt to explain social action or social power regardless of their specific context, societies, or historical periods. Grand theories are written in such a way that it is hard to test them empirically.
- **Middle range theories** are ideas that aspire to explain more limited areas of social life and can be tested empirically, that is, subjected to evidence. They should also be able to produce empirical generalizations that may lead to occurrence of new theories. An example of a middle range theory is the theory of relative deprivation, which claims that people consider themselves disadvantaged in some ways (for example, poorer) not in an absolute way, but only if they do worse than the social group to which they aspire. The relative deprivation theory can be tested empirically to see how people evaluate

their social position compared to others, but it also proposes a new theoretical concept, or generalization: a reference group to which people compare themselves or want to belong.

### **Deductive and Inductive Approaches**

Social research may be conducted using a deductive or inductive approach. The **deductive approach** starts with a particular theoretical statement and uses hypothesis testing to confirm or reject that statement. An **inductive approach** starts with the collection of data, and then moves to an empirical generalization or a formulation of theory. In an inductive approach, the data have primacy over the theory. The extreme manifestation of the inductive approach is grounded theory, an approach that advocates theory creation in a continuous interaction between generalizing the data and creating theoretical statements. There are times when a grounded theory approach will only lead to empirical generalizations rather than an actual theory of explanation.

### **Epistemological Considerations**

**Epistemology** refers to the nature of knowledge or the questions about what we can know and how we can acquire that knowledge. There are several positions on knowledge acquisition that apply to social research, with the two opposing forms of epistemology in sociology being positivism and interpretivism.

**Positivist epistemology** rests on the following main principles:

1. The only valid knowledge is such that is acquired through our senses (empiricism).
2. The key purpose of theory is to generate law-like explanations of social reality.
3. Theory should be tested by the means of hypotheses using observable evidence.
4. Scientific statements are only those statements that emerge out of this rigorous procedure of hypothesis testing; normative statements, because they cannot be tested by evidence, are not scientific.

In other words, positivism defends creating theories by the similar scientific process as natural science do.

By contrast, **interpretivism** claims that social world is different from the natural world; therefore, it cannot be studied by the same methods. According to interpretivism, the aim of social research is not to discover universal social laws, but to understand human behaviour and the meanings people attach to their actions. Hence, the goal of social scientists is to understand the social world from the point of view of the people they study, not through some detached interpretations of people's action social scientists may create. Therefore, the study of social world requires a research procedure different from that of natural sciences. Within this school, Weber defended empathetic understanding of social action, or *Verstehen*. His position called for both explanation of social action and understanding it.

**Symbolic interactionism** is one sociological perspective which represents interpretivism. The founders of this perspective claimed, for example, that individual self-understanding emerges only through appreciation of the perception of others, or by "taking the role of the others" (G. Herbert Mead). People take part in social interaction because they constantly interpret the symbolic meaning of their environment, and their identities emerge in the process of this interaction. The task of social scientists is, therefore, to understand the interpretation through which actors construct their action (Bulmer).

Like interpretivism, critical approaches in social science developed in reaction to positivism. Unlike positivists and classical interpretivists, who defend a value-neutral stance toward their subjects or understanding the people they study, critical social scientists stand for active support of their research subjects. Critical scholars advocate using the knowledge not only to understand but also to improve the social position of the people they study. According to them, research should not only aim at creating knowledge, but it should also be practice-

oriented and help to empower those they study—help them to change their lives. The critical perspectives are often embraced by feminist, anti-poverty, anti-racist scholars, and by queer studies.

One example of critical approach is the participatory action research (PAR), or simply “action research.” This orientation to research treats studied people as equal creators of social research, together with social scientists and public officials. During the research, all participants discuss the actions taken and what kind of knowledge they generate, as well as further actions to take. This process is meant to directly improve the social situation of the participants. Of all the approaches to social science, PAR it is the closest one to social and political activism.

## **Ontological Considerations**

Ontology is concerned with the nature of social reality and how it can be understood. There are two contrary forms of ontology in social research: objectivism and constructionism. A third form, the soft constructionism, can be seen as a hybrid of the two.

**Objectivism** assumes a pre-existent (objective) social reality that is beyond our control. This reality can be studied together with the social order and rules it creates. Social reality is considered as a distinct, timeless, and universal entity. Given its view that social reality is given and immutable, objectivism may lead to a research bias or assumptions about formal properties of social groups and interactions between them.

According to **constructionism** (hard), reality does not exist separately—it is merely a reflection of our mental constructions. Social reality is not a given, but a negotiated social order which is constantly changing. Given these views, constructionism may lead to a research bias assuming the constantly changing nature of social organization.

**Soft-constructionism** argues that there may be an objective social reality but it is not reflected in our ideas. Rather, our ideas of reality are created to justify or rationalize various forms of domination. Social reality is not an immutable given, but is a negotiated social order open to change.

## **General Orientations: Quantitative and Qualitative Research**

**Quantitative research** incorporates the use of numbers and statistics to collect and analyze data. It relies on an objectivist orientation towards social reality, on a positivist epistemology of natural sciences, and requires deductive methods of hypothesis testing.

Conversely, **qualitative research** tends to be mainly inductive, generates theory after data collection, and employs interpretivist epistemology of understanding meanings of human action. Its view of reality is based on constructionist ontological position, which sees reality as constructed rather than as objectively given.

Although there are tendencies toward opposing epistemologies, opposing ontological perspectives and the use of contrasting research methods, the distinction between the qualitative and quantitative approaches may not be so clear-cut. There might be qualitative methods used in conjunction with constructivist view of social reality, or qualitative methods used with positivistic assumptions. There may also be instances where deductive or inductive approaches are used with the contrasting methodological approach. Very often, however, ontological orientations, epistemology, and research methods will follow a distinct research strategy.

## **Influences on the Conduct of Social Research**

Social research is influenced by a variety of factors such as values, politics, and practical considerations.

**Values** are a part of human nature. As such, researchers will have their own personal beliefs, values, and feelings when conducting research. Values can enter the research process and influence the research process or outcomes in several places. Can research actually be value-free or

should researchers use their values to direct and interpret their investigations? This difficulty is overcome somewhat by recognition of your potential biases and acknowledging them clearly at the beginning of the research writing, as well as by reflexivity throughout the report. This does not mean that values must be removed; rather, they may be exactly the reason why research is conducted, as, for example, in feminist research.

Political issues in research include the following:

- Researchers may take sides, such as feminist researchers who focus on social disadvantage based in gender or researchers who have particular views on free market versus governmental intervention in economic issues.
- Funding of research is often by its very nature political. The group or agency funding research has interests in the research, as well as the outcome of the research. That is often why they fund a research project. Political influences can be seen in who gets to decide what is researched, how it is researched, what the outcome should be, and what is done with the research conclusions.
- Gatekeepers have a direct stake at how their organisation is represented in the research, and because of this, they often manage the access to research subjects, control who is being selected, or set limitations on publications of research results.
- Negotiation with institutions is often required to gain access to otherwise invisible processes. In closed organizations, several layers of gatekeepers may be present attempting to protect varying interests.
- Publication restriction may occur for research results that do not conform to the interests or beliefs of the funding agency or publisher.

*Practical considerations:* Research orientation, design, or method must match the research topic and particular research question being investigated. Studying a minority group to understand how its members view themselves relative to other similar groups would likely entail a qualitative approach. By contrast, an assessment of the feelings toward a governmental policy would likely require a quantitative approach; however, a qualitative component may be useful as a secondary method of in-depth analysis for some key points or localized impact. As significant and interesting as the issues of epistemology and ontology seem, it is the practical considerations that drive the ability to actually conduct the research.

Good research starts with a clear research question. Research questions often determine the direction of inquiry and the quality of findings, since it sets realistic boundaries on conducting the research. A good research question should be interesting and researchable, links with other research questions in the study, and have the potential to make a contribution to the existing knowledge on the topic.

## Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you should learn to do the following:

- Identify the connection between theory and research in social science and differentiate between deductive and inductive approaches to social research
- Understand that social research is strongly informed by philosophical assumptions we make about the nature of knowledge and the nature of social reality—epistemology and ontology
- Name the main principles of social research formulated by positivism, interpretivism, and critical theories
- Understand how these main philosophical and theoretical approaches result in two distinct orientations to doing research: quantitative and qualitative

- Distinguish among the main factors influencing the conduct of social research: philosophical orientations and theories, values, practical considerations, and politics.
- Appreciate the crucial role of the research questions in successful implementation of the research

## Media Resources

For an example of social research conducted to explore human response, see Milgram's 1963 study of obedience. [http://www.age-of-the-sage.org/psychology/milgram\\_obedience\\_experiment.html](http://www.age-of-the-sage.org/psychology/milgram_obedience_experiment.html)

- What practical considerations did Milgram overlook when conducting his research?
- What ontological perspective was Milgram working from?
- What did we learn about obedience from the Milgram experiment?
- What political ramifications with regard to war and soldiers came out of Milgram's experiment?
- How do the lessons learned from the Milgram experiment help us to better design research methods?

For an example of empirical generalization without a theoretical component, refer to the study "Employment patterns of families with children, 1976 to 2014" from Statistics Canada. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/150624/dq150624a-eng.htm>

- What use might the data have for social researchers?
- How might this data be used in a political context?

For current commentary related to the Kelley and De Graff study, read the following articles: <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/fashion/features/why-are-asian-women-aspiring-to-western-ideals-of-beauty-2136868.html> and <http://www.theweek.co.uk/60339/eleven-things-women-in-saudi-arabia-cannot-do>

- How could sociologists apply ontological perspectives to these articles?
- Are either of them clearly objectivism or constructionism?
- Politically speaking, is there a reliance on one or the other ontological perspectives?

For a qualitative sociologist's thoughts on epistemology, see the following article: <http://www.sfu.ca/~palys/Becker-EpistemologyOfQualitativeResearch.pdf>

- According to Becker, what are the specific characteristics of a qualitative research epistemology?
- What are the differences between epistemology for qualitative and quantitative research?
- Given the differences in epistemology, can the same social setting be researched with both qualitative and quantitative research methods?

Consider the culture of denial of doctor's mistakes described by Dr Goldman: [http://www.ted.com/talks/brian\\_goldman\\_doctors\\_make\\_mistakes\\_can\\_we\\_talk\\_about\\_that?language=en](http://www.ted.com/talks/brian_goldman_doctors_make_mistakes_can_we_talk_about_that?language=en)

- If you had to organize a study of how doctors manage their professional identity, which research orientation—qualitative or quantitative—would you use? Why?
- What ontological consideration would you take into account in the organization of such research?
- What practical problems and political issues could you foresee in implementation of this research?